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A nationwide study of fatal crashes at traffic signals in 1999 and 2000 estimated that 20 percent of the drivers involved failed to obey the signals. In 2007, almost 900 people were killed and an estimated 153,000 were injured in crashes that involved red light running. About half of the deaths in red light running crashes are pedestrians and occupants in other vehicles who are hit by the red light runners. Motorists are more likely to be injured in urban crashes involving red light running than in other types of urban crashes.

Enforcing traffic laws in dense urban areas by traditional means poses special difficulties for police, who in most cases must follow a violating vehicle through a red light to stop it. This can endanger motorists and pedestrians as well as officers, and police cannot be everywhere at once. Traffic stops in urban areas can exacerbate traffic congestion. Communities do not have the resources to allow police to patrol intersections as often as would be needed to ticket all motorists who run red lights.

One of the arguments against red light camera programs is that there are in place solely to generate revenue. Ultimately, the objective of photo enforcement is to deter violators, not to catch them. Signs and publicity campaigns typically warn drivers that photo enforcement is in use. Revenue is generated from fines paid by drivers who continue to run red lights, but this is a fundamental component of all traffic enforcement programs. Independent audits of red light camera enforcement have found inconsistent results. For example, the California state auditor reported in 2002 that red light cameras were not generating large amounts of revenue. The financial status of only two of the state's seven camera programs was break-even or better. The US General Accounting Office reported in 2003 on the contribution of federal funds to local use of photo enforcement technology and the amount of revenue generated by these programs. The report found that photo enforcement program revenues were lower than program costs in three jurisdictions, while the revenues in two other jurisdictions exceeded program costs.

Another argument against red light cameras is that if the timing of the yellow light is increased, it would better reduce red light running and crashes than red light cameras. In January 2005, the Texas Institute of Transportation concluded that extending a yellow light by 1.5 seconds would reduce red-light running by 50%. This same study also demonstrated that red light cameras in intersections resulted in a 40% decrease in red-light violation, and that nearby intersections without red-light cameras also had a decrease in violations. In 2008, a study of the effectiveness of prolonged yellow light timing and camera enforcement of red light running in Philadelphia demonstrated that red